

The Painting Table

A Journal of Loss and Joy



ROGER HUTCHISON



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For Mammaw

Melva Curry

September 16, 1916–February 18, 2004

I sure do miss you.



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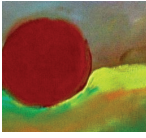
Sharon Pearson . . . my editor, and more importantly, my friend
*Your encouragement, love for, and support of The Painting Table
means the world to me. Thank you.*

The children and families of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Columbia,
South Carolina
*You bless my life every day. You've taught me to listen with my ears
and listen with my heart.*

The children and families of Trinity Episcopal Church, Newtown,
Connecticut
*I will never forget sharing The Painting Table with you. Your
strength, resiliency, and smiles inspire me. Your light shines bright in
the darkness.*

Riley Elizabeth
I love being your dad. You are my greatest inspiration and joy.

Kristin . . . my wife and best friend
*Thank you for the love and laughter. This is a pretty incredible life
we are leading. I am so glad I share it with you. I can't wait to see
what's next.*



Foreword by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

From one generation to the next we pass on bits of our lives, little by little, with words as simple as—“Don’t be afraid. I am with you.” We share parts of ourselves with actions as common as breaking bread and blowing on hot soup. Smiles and tears make imprints on our minds. Every encounter changes us.

The Native American poet, Joy Harjo, writes, “The world begins at the kitchen table.” And perhaps it does. Under the table, pets nip at our ankles begging for food. It is here that babies bang their utensils and spill milk, where children play hide and seek, where they first taste sweet watermelon and spit out the seeds and learn manners, where adults light candles and place vases of flowers. It is here where families share the day, sometimes laugh, sometimes argue. It is at the table that we slam down our spoons in anger, pretend we are not hungry and walk away. It is here that we always return and offer thanks.

Loss and sorrow enter our homes and it is at the kitchen table that we take a deep breath and sit down. People tell us we have to eat; we have to let go even as we hold on. And we do what is required; we take the first bite—we share hard-boiled eggs, a sign that life, though different, continues. We prepare the food our dear ones once made or adored and our senses conjure up their presence.

There are nicks, scratches, and daps of color on our tables, the signs of crayons and paints gone astray. Another generation comes and suggests that we might want to buy a more contemporary table, or at the very least refurbish the old. But we won’t, because every scratch and dent contains a memory.

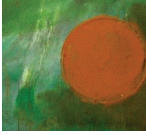
And that is when it begins, the storytelling. The people who once gathered around that table are no more. Those who did Sunday crossword puzzles, those who quilted, and those who painted are gone. The conversations, the heated and the quiet ones, have been silenced. The dead feel no more pain; they don’t weep anymore, but they don’t laugh either.

It feels for a moment like nothing remains. But although it seems impossible, we discover that we can make something out of nothing. We can tell our loved one’s story as it intertwines with ours. We can give that story voice as we color their lives with pen or brush. New generations watch and listen, and the past becomes part of who they are. It becomes part of their story.

Research teaches us that families who tell their children stories of their lives and help them tell their own stories, are more resilient. Young people come to realize that they are part of something bigger than themselves. They are part of a story that reaches back in time and they are connected to others in ways that are unique to them. Marshall Duke of Emory University calls those family narratives, our “fingerprint.”

Roger Hutchison invites us to pull up a comfortable chair to his kitchen painting table and begin to write, to draw, to mark it with our fingerprint.

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso is an award-winning author of many children’s books including *God’s Paintbrush* and *Creation’s First Light* as well as *Midrash—Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, a book for adults.



Introduction

As the Canon for Children's Ministries at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia, South Carolina, I have the opportunity of leading weekly chapel services for the children of the Trinity Learning Center. These are grace-filled moments. We experience the stories of our faith through word, song, movement, and prayer. There is a palpable joy that fills the chapel when we gather together.

It is a thin and holy space where God is known.

Whether it is the call of the playground or simply a wandering mind, the children are sometimes unable to focus and it takes me a few moments to round them back in. This never happens to us adults, right?

"Listen with your ears . . . and listen with your heart." This is the mantra we speak when all focus seems lost. The children have come to love these words—and they say them with me—our voices fill the room with gladness and light.

Children understand what it means to listen with their hearts.

The poet, Mary Oliver, uses similar words in her poem "Sometimes" from *Red Bird: Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008):

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

I am an artist. I find joy when I move my paint-covered fingers across a blank canvas that sits atop my painting table. This is the place where I go to pray. This is the place where I go to listen with my heart. This is the place where the fullness of my life settles down and I can "pay attention" to that still small voice.

This simple book shares the familiar story of a boy, his grandmother, and the table where his earliest memories of love, commitment, and garden-grown tomatoes were served.

It is also an invitation to join me at my painting table. There are many different ways that you can use this book. Grieving the loss of a loved one, struggling in a relationship, or facing a major change in your life? This book is for you. Celebrating the birth of a child, entering a new phase of life, or just needing to be in community with others? This book is for you.

You are also invited to create your own Painting Table group in your church, school, or community for children and adults of all ages and abilities. The end result of The Painting Table is not the painting that is created. It is the conversation, sharing, and listening that takes place around the table. It is one mother comforting another mother as they both grieve for their friend who lost a child. It is like the conversation I had once with a third grade girl who told me she had had a really bad day. Her painting was dark and frantic. I listened to her for a little while—then encouraged her to paint another one. The second painting was a bit more colorful. She took her two paintings and smashed them together. When she pulled them apart, the darkness had lifted. I could see light, love, and a beautiful smile.

And sometimes the Painting Table helps us express our gratitude for life, as well. We are created in God's image so at the very center of our being is that need and desire to create. One does not have to be a "trained" or "professional" artist to do this. Have you ever watched a child coloring or painting? There is an authenticity and holy joy in that very moment. Resources for starting your own Painting Table group can be found within these pages. You can also find more at www.thepaintingtable.com

While there is grief, sadness, and loss, there is also hope. There is an opportunity for celebration as we gather together, break bread, talk, and are welcomed. Whether through cooking, painting, or Eucharist, we come together to remember.

For many, life happens around the kitchen table, but here we gather at the painting table where you are invited to draw pictures, record memories, and experience transformation and new birth through the creation of something original within the pages of this book. There are pages in this book set aside just for this.

I encourage you to listen with your ears . . . and listen with your heart . . . then tell us all about it!

I've been waiting for you. I receive you with open arms as my Grandmother did and God does. Let us break bread together.

Thank you for joining me. I am glad you are here.

Roger Hutchison
June 2013

THE PAINTING TABLE

Story



Life happened around the
kitchen table.



It was a simple oak table adorned with plain dishes and a bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables.

There were

tomatoes and squash,
okra and peas.

The colors of the food, fresh and jewel-like, made the table shine like a rainbow.

There was no silver. There was no pretense.

Excited and eager conversation moved around the table like smooth river stones being skipped across the glassy surface of a pond.

We held hands.

We held our breaths.

We offered thanksgiving; we broke bread.

I never wanted it to end.



I received the table
as a gift
when my Mammaw died.



It is the same simple oak table
where laughter,
love, and gifts from the garden
gave us life.

It was the same table, when covered with quilts and blankets,
that made the best fort.



It is the same table where the hospice nurse told us
the end
of Mammaw's life
was near.

